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# Multicultural Education in Head Start Classrooms

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# **Multicultural Education in Head Start Classrooms**

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## **Executive Summary**

This research is used to determine whether Head Start addresses the cultural needs of its diverse clientele or if it assimilates its clients into the mainstream culture. It is based on the concept that culture affects how children learn. Culture is acquired through social interactions with parents and other social institutions. The connection of culture and learning is explained in the theories of Cooley, Mead, and Vygotsky. Cooley and Mead have two main theories of socialization; both examine how one acquires culture through social interactions. Vygotsky's theory describes how children develop cognitively. His theory is also based on social interactions.

Considering the importance of culture on learning, a need for multicultural education is recognized. A multicultural classroom should be child-centered, reflect the students in the classroom, involve the parents, and give the students opportunities to be introduced to new cultures. Sandra Nieto (1994) identifies four levels of multicultural education on a continuum, ranging from assimilation to cultural pluralism, namely: (1) tolerance, (2) acceptance, (3) respect, and (4) affirmation, solidarity, and critique.

Head Start was created to address the needs of low-income students entering school. The majority of its clients are minorities and therefore Head Start should be using multicultural principles in the classroom. However, in the past the United States has used education as a tool for assimilating students. Head Start is a governmental program and therefore it has the potential to be used to assimilate rather than accommodate its students.

The research was conducted by examining Head Start literature, conducting classroom observations, and interviewing teachers. Seven classrooms and teachers, three

It was discovered that while Head Start is not assimilating its clients, it is also not fully addressing the cultural needs of the diverse population it serves. The fourth level in Nieto's spectrum focuses on affirmation, solidarity, and critique. Based on the Head Start literature, it appears that the Head Start program falls in this level. However, the classroom environment and teaching practices are not consistent with Head Start literature and would fall into Nieto's tolerance category. To enable teachers at Head Start to implement the highly multicultural principles claimed in the *Head Start Performance Standards*, it is necessary for Head Start to provide training programs and information for its teachers.

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## **Introduction**

The American education system today has large disparities in achievement among lower class and minority students compared with middle and upper class white children. The statistics on the low educational attainment of minority and low income students is disheartening. For example, among nine year olds in 1996, white students had an average score of 220 on a reading proficiency exam, while Hispanic students had an average score of 194, and blacks averaged 190, a full 30 points below white students (U.S. Department of Education 1998). Another example, in 1999, 28.6% of Hispanic and 12.6% of black children dropped out of school, compared to only 7.3% of whites (U.S. Department of Education 2001). Many people believe that these gaps occur because less funding goes to schools in poor areas. While finances may be one aspect of the problem, the low achievement of minorities is not exclusively a financial problem.

The educational system in the United States can be characterized as a system of mass education whereby local, state, and national governments set the standards and provide funds. As a social institution, the educational system is created by and formed to meet the standards of those with the most powerful voice in the nation's government. In the United States, the most powerful are middle and upper class people of European descent. Framed in the majority cultural view, schools often neglect or misunderstand the needs of students from other backgrounds or subcultures.

As a social institution, schools have latent functions. Beyond teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, schools are agents of socialization, and at the extreme, are agents of assimilation. In school, students learn how to behave, what to value, and to be loyal to

the country. In the past, the United States has been quite open about its use of schools in assimilating immigrants and other minority students (Tozer 1998).

Today the tide has shifted somewhat. It is not unusual to hear terms like 'multicultural education', 'bilingual programming', and 'diversity' in school-related discussions. This recent shift of focus has come about in response to the high levels of academic failure for minority groups (DeGaetano, Williams and Volk 1998). But what do those terms actually mean and who is defining them, the white majority, or the minority groups that they are aimed to serve?

In 1965 Head Start was founded in the midst of the civil rights movement. It was founded to help low-income children become socially competent and thus prepared for school. It was aimed at stopping the cycle of poverty by giving low-income students the same chance of succeeding in schools as other children (Head Start 2001). Low-income children often lack the experiences of middle and upper class children. Often their parents have less education, time, and/or resources to provide their children with the same educational background provided to majority children (Klein and Chen 2001). In recent years, Head Start has gained renewed attention and emphasis. Both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush specifically mentioned Head Start in their education plans.

Head Start serves 70% minority children, and with few exceptions, all are lower class (Head Start 2001). The minority population in the United States is projected to increase dramatically in coming years. By 2020 it is estimated that the U.S. population will be 16.3% Hispanic, 12.9% black, 5.7% Asian, and 64.3% white; in 2050 those estimates shift to 24.5% Hispanic, 13.6% black, 8.2% Asian, and 52.8% white (Day, 1996). Minorities are more likely to live in poverty than whites. In 2000, 21.2% of

Hispanics and 22.1% of blacks lived in poverty compared to only 7.5% of whites (U.S. Census 2002). The increasing minority population combined with the poverty and academic underachievement of minorities indicate that this country needs to do something to increase the educational achievement of minority children. Without improvements to the educational system, it is likely that a large undereducated underclass will be created. Head Start, as a child's first experience with a school setting is critical in starting a child out on the right path. Head Start's use of and philosophy on multicultural education can make a large difference in improving education for low-income and minority children.

## **Literature Review**

### **What is Culture?**

Children are born into societies that are systematically governed by shared values, beliefs, practices, and rules of conduct, in short, by culture. Culture is developed by the social interactions of groups of relatively isolated people adapting to their circumstances including the area's climate, geography, population, and available technology (Schaefer 1998). As circumstances change, the culture adapts. Thus culture is dynamic. Culture is learned and socially transmitted through social institutions, such as schools and churches, and social interactions with parents, friends, community members, and the media (DeGaetano et al.1998; Klein and Chen 2001).

In very large societies, like the United States, subcultures can come into existence. Subcultures share the major values and core beliefs of the main culture, but have come to exist with their own distinct behavioral patterns and beliefs. Subcultures occur because of shared interests or backgrounds, like a common occupation or common



religious beliefs (Schaefer 1998). Subcultures also emerge when specific problems or situations are faced only by certain groups of people. For example, those living in highly impoverished areas or in highly crime ridden areas form a subculture. They face unique situations that the dominant culture does not have to face, like worrying how they will eat tomorrow, or learning to be 'street smart' (Schaefer 1998). People from specific racial backgrounds also form subcultures because they often share special interests and situations. The United States is unique in that it is a country with high levels of immigration. People coming from other countries bring the culture of their home country with them; these ethnic groups are one more example of subcultures found within the U.S. (Schaefer 1998).

Parents are the first agents of socialization that a child encounters. Parents pass their culture on to their children through their interactions with their children and through their expectations of the children. Young children are particularly isolated within the world of their parents or primary caregivers and only know their surrounding culture. For lack of other experiences, children may perceive the subculture as the primary culture and may have trouble adjusting to the dominant culture when they do encounter it. Conversely, those people from the majority culture who have never had experience with a subculture may have trouble relating to other people or understanding some of the different behaviors among subcultures.

### **Schools as Assimilators**

Schools are another agent of socialization. Often they are the first place where children will meet with people different from themselves. They also are likely to be the first place where children will have contact with a social institution outside of the family.

In school, children are taught how to properly interact with peers and adults. Because schools are a social institution, the values and behaviors taught most often coincide with those of the dominant culture (Schaefer 1998). In order to succeed, students must act in ways that correspond to the dominant culture's expectations, which can lead to assimilation. Assimilation is the process of becoming part of the dominant culture (Klein and Chen 2001). In the past, schools were used by the dominant culture as a tool to assimilate students from subcultures. One of the goals of public schools was to Americanize students (Tozer 1998). Examples include the treatment of European immigrants, Native Americans, African Americans, and more recently the treatment of Hispanic Americans.

From the beginning of this country, education has been used as a way to preserve the majority culture and to assimilate immigrants to the dominant culture. Education was used to create a national identity and pride in American values. Take for example the practices of saying the pledge of allegiance every morning or learning patriotic songs in music class. Public schools and mandatory attendance were established for the purpose of Americanizing youth (Tozer 1998). Horace Mann, a well-known promoter of the common schools advocated this system of schools as a means of distributing common values among people. Naturally, the values Mann endorsed aligned with his own, basically middle-class, Protestant, democratic values (Tozer 1998). During the great immigration flood of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, citizenship and English classes were even created for adults to help stem the tide of new cultures and create a national identity (Carlson 1975). The idea was to 'Americanize' the immigrants before contact with them would pollute or foreignize American culture (Valverde 1993;

Noguera 1999). Traditionally the push for assimilation was more extreme during periods of national crisis, such as the Revolutionary war and both World Wars. These were periods that called for more national unity and one national identity (Carlson 1975).

Assimilation was even more extreme for people of color. Nowhere is there more evidence of education being used for assimilation as in the treatment of Native Americans. In the mid to late 1800s, Americans began taking more of an interest in assimilating the remaining population of Native Americans. They did this with boarding schools. Native children were taken from their homes and forced to cut their hair, dress in American styles, take English names, and attend boarding schools. At those schools, Native students were taught that their culture was savage, uncivilized, and wrong and that the white American way was correct. When their education was 'complete,' Native Americans were returned to their reservations with the hope that they would help educate and assimilate their peers. However the students no longer fit into their own cultures and were neither accepted at home nor by the white community. This practice continued for nearly 100 years, and led to the disillusionment and displacement of thousands of native youngsters. (Carlson 1975; Valverde 1993)

African Americans and Hispanic Americans had a different fate. It was believed that these groups could not be Americanized and therefore education was denied to them. The only education given to Hispanic Americans and African Americans came from missionaries who felt that they were heathens needing to be saved. The goal of the missionaries was not necessarily to educate but to Christianize their students (Carlson 1975; Valverde 1993). Education finally became available for minorities in the late nineteenth century, but only in the form of segregated schools. Even in segregated

schools, the goal was to make minorities, whether Asian, black, or Hispanic more Anglicized and more American. White educators continued to enforce the perception that minority students were inferior and therefore needed to be placed in specialized programs. These practices continued into the 1970s (Carlson 1975; Valverde 1993).

The elimination of other languages was often used as a tool in assimilating minorities. Language is a fundamental part of one's culture. It is the vehicle to transmit culture and is the cultural tool that gives meaning to the world (Schaefer 1998). To eliminate a language is to diminish a culture (Valverde 1993). In the early American educational system, no language other than English was allowed. English was forced on all European, Hispanic, and Asian immigrants and Native Americans (Carlson 1975).

The use of education to Americanize students continues today, and language is still a useful tool. Of particular interest to people today is the influx of Spanish speaking populations. When the idea of bilingual education is discussed, it is often dismissed by comments such as "they're in this country they should speak our language." Bilingual education has many different aspects and is a hotly debated issue in education and in society at large. Consider proposition 27, which was approved in California. Among the provisions is the prohibition of bilingual education in public schools (Noguera 1999). In President George W. Bush's recently passed education plan "No Child Left Behind (2001)," one of the goals is to teach English proficiency to students as quickly as possible.

### **Culture and Learning**

While the psychological problems, like low self-esteem, that children face after they are forced to assimilate may be readily apparent, it still does not give a complete

explanation for why minorities have lower levels of school achievement than white students. To more adequately understand that problem, one must first understand the processes of how children are socialized and how children learn. More importantly, one must understand the connection of culture to the learning process.

Cooley and Mead developed the two widely recognized theories of socialization. Cooley's theory is characterized as the 'Looking Glass Self'. Cooley believed that early in life we learn about ourselves by interpreting other people's reactions to us. Cooley believed that we develop our self-concept and beliefs about ourselves by interpreting others' judgments of us (Robertson 1987). Mead's theory built on Cooley's and is characterized by social interaction. Mead believed that interaction takes place through socially learned symbols such as gestures and language. Language was particularly important to Mead. He felt that without language one can not have a mind, for a mind is socially constructed through the language one acquires. Mead believed that humans achieve the ability to anticipate what others expect of us and shape our behavior to fit those expectations. He believed that we internalize these expectations and act them out. With children, the first expectations internalized are those of their parents. As children grow they become able to internalize the expectations of society or the 'generalized other.' This acting on the expectations of society is equal to learning the rules of one's culture. Mead's theory centered on role taking and children acting according to the expectations of the role they feel they fit (Robertson 1987).

Both of these theories of socialization emphasize that as children grow, they learn how to interpret other people's reactions to them or expectations of them and adapt their behavior to present the desired image to the outside world. The adaptation of one's

behavior indicates that children have learned the rules of their culture and know how to act appropriately in certain situations. Both theories emphasize that learning takes place through social interactions. Other theories of learning attempt to explain cognitive rather than social development and are exemplified by those of Piaget and Vygotsky.

Piaget is most well known for his stage theory of cognitive development. He felt that there are four stages of development that all children go through in the same order. He believed that children learn by acting on their environment, meaning that as children try new things, either by accident or deliberately, they notice the effects of their actions and will try to reproduce and control those effects. Eventually children do learn to control their actions and make sense of the new situations. Piaget believed that this ability to control and understand the environment or a new situation could only happen if the child is in the right stage at the time of the experience. He used two terms to explain the process of connecting old information with new information. In his theory, assimilation is the process of incorporating new information into a category of knowledge that is already known. Accommodation is adjusting the old ideas or categories to incorporate a new idea. By moving between assimilation and accommodation children move through the stages of acquiring new knowledge (Berk 1997).

Piaget did feel that there are individual and cultural differences in cognitive development, but found the only differences to be in the pace which children move through the stages. He felt that some children reach new stages earlier than others due to the circumstances and experiences available for discovery. Nonetheless, he believed all children move through all aspects of all stages. He also firmly believed that development happens through children acting on their environment, a very individualistic stance on

learning (Williams 1991). He did not account for social interactions and their role in the development of children. With this in mind, a Piagetan classroom is very much centered on self-discovery learning, acceptance of individual differences in children, and a focus on readiness. A Piagetan classroom understands that some children learn at different paces and sets up the classroom in such a way that all children will be able to learn something regardless of the stage they are in. It also believes in readiness, meaning that concepts are developed as children indicate an interest in them. Concepts are not pushed onto child before they indicate that they are interested or ready. Teachers would rather hold back children until they indicate readiness rather than pushing a concept (Berk 1997).

The Vygotsky theory of learning and cognitive development is a social approach to learning. Vygotsky felt that children acquire knowledge through social and linguistic interactions. He believed children work within a cultural frame of reference as they approach the world (Berk 1997). Vygotsky's theory centers around two main concepts, the zone of proximal development (what children can accomplish with the assistance of another but not on their own) and scaffolding. Scaffolding means building on children's existing knowledge to teach them new things and is conducted either by an adult or another child. It is the process of helping children connect old information with new information and break down large, seemingly difficult tasks into smaller, more familiar tasks that are manageable to them (Berk 1997). This process is particularly important for young children whose experiences thus far in life are severely limited to interactions and experiences within their home and neighborhood. Their individual cultural experiences form the basis on which they will build new knowledge and the other person is able to

connect with those first cultural experiences. Vygotsky leads us to believe that children will learn differently and have different zones of proximal development based on their cultural background and who is interacting and scaffolding with them (Berk 1997).

While Piaget's stages of cognitive development are widely accepted, it is also widely criticized for not taking into account social interactions and cultural differences in the processes of cognitive development. On the other hand, Vygotsky includes social interactions and previous experiences as essential elements of a child's development. According to Mead and Cooley, social interactions teach culture, and according to Vygotsky, social interactions teach cognitive elements. Because Vygotsky's approach combines the elements of socialization and cognitive development, an important concept when considering the effect of culture on the learning process, his theory of learning will guide this paper.

By understanding that cognitive development and socialization are closely intertwined, it is easier to see that children faced with a new culture in school will have trouble learning. This connection helps to explain that the problem of assimilation in schools extends beyond psychological realms and into the very process of learning. In the following section, some examples of how interactions and learning may vary across cultures are presented.

### **Examples of Difference in Learning Among Cultures**

Much of the cultural differences in learning styles originate from the interactions children have with parents. Parents of different cultures may have different styles of teaching their children. Some parents may use more oral instruction with their children; some may use more modeling techniques. Immigrant parents have been educated under a



different system than the one used in the United States and thus may have different teaching and interaction styles with their children (Planos and Zayas 1995). Planos and Zayas, who studied the ways Dominican and Puerto Rican mothers interacted with their children, found that mothers do interact differently. Puerto Rican mothers tended to use more inquiry and praise while Dominican mothers tended to use more directives, visual cues, and modeling. This could be based on culture or acculturation. The Puerto Rican mothers, most of who had been raised in the United States, interacted with their children more like the manner found in American schools. Thus if a teacher were to use mainly verbal instruction with the Dominican children, the children may not respond correctly or become confused.

Parents in subcultures also may have different behavioral expectations of their children. Some parents may expect their children to be vocally curious and ask questions or interact with other adults; others may expect their children to be quiet and not speak with adults unless spoken too. Parents may expect their children to be quiet and observant while others expect their children to be highly active. Some may find it rude for children to look adults in the eye, while others expect direct eye contact as a sign of attention. Parents may expect obedience and conformity while teachers are looking for outgoingness or creativity. Some studies have shown that the type of verbal interactions between white middle-class and African-American parents can vary. White parents tend to ask more specific, objective questions, similar to those normally asked in schools. African-American adults tend to ask more open-ended questions that call for story answers or personal feelings rather than objective answers (Berk 1997). Different yet, Native American students may speak very slowly and controlled, thinking very deeply

about their response, and often teachers can interrupt their thinking before they were done speaking or worse yet, teachers may think that they are slow learners and label them as learning challenged (Berk 1997). The conflicting expectations can be confusing to students and frustrating to teachers and parents (Planos and Zayas 1995; DeGaetano et al. 1998).

Parents may also have varying expectations regarding their children's education. Some may expect their children to learn only academic subjects while others value social competence and acceptance just as highly or even higher than intellectual performance (Berk 1997). Some parents may expect that teachers will be the only expert in their child's learning process and do not anticipate being participants, while others expect to have a large role in their child's school. Some parents simply do not know that they are expected to be active participants in their child's school experience (Dillard 1999).

Social class can also play a large role in what students have experienced and been socialized to before they reach school. Class can affect the amount of resources available to students and the amount of experiences they have before reaching school. It also affects the educational level of parents and their abilities to share knowledge with their children. Some low-income students will have many more interactions with people than with objects. These students will lack experience with the objects, games, or toys that they will be tested on when they reach school (Berk 1997). Working class or lower class families also tend to place much importance on external characteristics, such as obedience, appearance, and conformity while white-collar parents tend to encourage individuality and exploration, and internal development of traits (Berk 1997). This makes sense when considering the skills that parents from different social classes

consider important for success. In general, blue-collar jobs require adherence to specific instructions and routines while white-collar jobs require more innovation, risk-taking, and individuality (Robertson 1987).

Thus subcultures and immigrant cultures may have many different ways of teaching children, modes of interacting, and expectations of them. If teachers approach the classroom from the sole perspective of the dominant culture, children from subcultures could be alienated. They will have trouble understanding the material and the behaviors around them. At the same time, the teacher may be confused and frustrated by their behavior. Using only the dominant culture's interpretation of the behavior, children could be labeled as having a behavior disorder or learning disorder. Paying attention to cultural background in the classroom is particularly important with early childhood students because they are least likely to have had experiences with other cultures. These children must become adjusted to the new environment before they can begin to learn. They may feel out of place simply for following the behaviors that have always been acceptable at home. Students must be comfortable with themselves before they can learn effectively (Valverde 1993).

### **Views on Multicultural Education**

These examples of differences that might show up in classrooms illustrate the need for education that responds to the various needs of children. Multicultural education attempts to minimize the adverse effects that a different culture can have on children's educational achievement. It tries to educate children while acknowledging and accepting their culture. With the rise of the civil rights and black power movements in the late

sixties and early seventies, the idea of multicultural education began to get much attention within the school system.

Sandra Nieto (1994) describes multiculturalism as a spectrum of philosophies and practices. To provide a model of multicultural education, she divides the spectrum into four levels. These levels are fluid and most classrooms will have aspects of more than one level. At one end of the continuum is assimilation; at the other end is cultural pluralism. Below this spectrum is monocultural education. Monocultural education is the absence of diversity, and everything in the classroom represents the dominant culture. Teachers are of the dominant culture and have little or no training in diversity. These classrooms are proud of being color-blind.

The spectrum begins with tolerant classrooms. These classrooms are based on assimilationist philosophies where differences are “endured, not necessarily embraced” (Nieto 1994:11). These classrooms teach multiculturalism or diversity as a separate class activity. Diversity is often taught using holidays or culture specific events. Students who speak a second language are expected to learn English as soon as possible and are encouraged to use English as much as possible. The teachers of bilingual students do not have to be bilingual and therefore many not be able to communicate with their clients. Teachers in these classrooms have little or no training on diversity but have a desire to help their diverse students.

This first level is very similar to what others have called the ‘melting pot’ approach or the ‘tourist’ approach to multicultural education (Derman-Sparks 1989; Janzen 1994). This view acknowledges the importance and difference between all groups, but only so far as to eliminate their culture and blend students into mainstream

culture (Janzen 1994; DeGaetano et al. 1998). Supporters of this view have a tendency to believe that multicultural education is only needed for non-majority groups since they are the ones that need to eventually fit into mainstream society (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

The next in Nieto's (1994) levels of multiculturalism is acceptance. These classrooms are more accepting of diversity, yet still see it as something separate from the regular curriculum. For example, history lessons will have special multicultural segments about famous people of color. In these classrooms all students are encouraged to learn a second language. Students who do speak a second language are taught in their first language while they learn English. However, they are segregated from the other students most of the day and the attempt is still to mainstream them as quickly as possible. The curriculum is more diverse than in a tolerant classroom but it is not integrated. The staff is more diverse and there is often a special multicultural resource staff person. Teachers have also had some developments on diversity.

The third level of multiculturalism is respect. Here, the curriculum is more integrated and honest about issues of diversity. All languages represented in the school are represented on signs, flyers, and posters. Bilingual options are offered to students throughout their schooling and bilingual students interact with English students for most of the day. The staff is diverse and has had many professional developments including diversity training.

Nieto's final level of multiculturalism is affirmation, solidarity, and critique. In these classrooms differences and conflict are used as teaching tools. Here, diversity is an integral part of the curriculum. The curriculum is interdisciplinary and is developed with the help of the teachers, students, and parents. Issues of social justice are also addressed

and discussed in classrooms. Students are taught to be critical thinkers and to examine information from many points of view. All students are expected to learn a second language; students use both languages while learning and playing. Teachers in these classrooms are also learners. There are many developments and study groups for teachers to attend. Teachers work in teams to be able to find multiple approaches to any situation.

This final level corresponds to what many have called a cultural pluralist approach. This approach treats all cultures as equal and with none being more important than the other. It encourages students to have pride in their culture and develop respect for others. (Valverde 1993; Janzen 1994; DeGaetano et al. 1998) With this approach, the home cultures of the students remain intact while they are taught to maneuver within the dominant culture. Supporters of this approach believe that all children need to receive multicultural education because of the increasing interdependence of all people and to decrease social injustices (DeGaetano et al.1998). Majority children need exposure to other cultures while those of minority cultures need to be empowered by and learn through their own experiences and learn to function in the dominant culture (DeGaetano et al.1998). This approach is the most desirable approach because it respects all cultures and allows children to keep their home culture. This approach teaches all children to accept different cultural perspectives as opposed to the opposite spectrum, which aims to create one culture.

### **The multicultural classroom**

A multicultural classroom will have a distinctive look and feel about it. First of all, it will reflect all the cultures represented by the students, staff, and community of the

classroom. Secondly, because no teacher can realistically be expected to know all the differences in learning styles among all the cultures, and because there are variations within cultures, a multicultural classroom will be child-centered (Williams and DeGaetano 1985). Teachers will respond to the needs of the children and create a curriculum around the needs and interests of the children. With that in mind, there are some basic principles that should be followed. The classroom should be centered around the idea that children are deeply connected to their culture and that this culture must be appealed to in multiple ways in order for the child to be able to learn (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Diversity must permeate the classroom; it cannot be a part of only one period of the day or only during certain special months or weeks. Multicultural education creates an entire learning environment for the child (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

Teachers have the largest influence on a classroom therefore teachers must have a deep understanding of the culture, beliefs, and biases that they bring with them to the classroom (Williams 1991; DeGaetano et al. 1998; Klein and Chen 2001). Their culture has taught them to have certain expectations of their students. They must be aware of their biases or they may unconsciously engage in inappropriate behaviors with their students based on cultural misunderstandings. Once teachers are thoroughly aware of their own cultural background, they are better prepared to notice differences and similarities in the cultures of their students. They will be able to acknowledge their students' existing frames of reference to build on (Williams 1991; DeGaetano et al. 1998).

Teachers also must work hard to connect with the homes and communities of their students to gain a deep understanding of all aspects of the cultures of their students. They should interact closely and become familiar with the students' home situation and

parents. Teachers should also be closely observant of their students' behaviors before jumping to any conclusions, and if they observe something unusual, teachers need to find out if the behavior has a cultural basis (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Teachers need to design classroom environments that minimize the differences between the home environment and the school environment so students are comfortable enough to learn (Planos and Zayas 1995). Parents' teaching techniques need to be extended into the classroom as much as possible (Planos and Zayas 1995). The more a teacher knows about a student's cultural background, the more the teacher will be able to make connections to the student's previous experiences in creating a learning environment (Williams 1991).

The teachers must use this knowledge when making lesson and curriculum plans. They must be flexible in their teaching style and use many methods in order to help their students build and develop knowledge. They must be unbiased and nonstereotypical in their actions and words. Teachers also must be willing to address issues of social injustice and differences in their classrooms. Children notice discrepancies such as racism at an early age. When these issues come up, they need to be addressed in an unbiased and thorough way. Teachers must be willing to grab teachable moments and use them (DeGaetano et al. 1998, Klein and Chen 2001).

In a multicultural education classroom where more than one language is spoken, other languages must be treated as equally important as English or the majority language. It has been shown that without proper development and support of children's first language, they will never fully grasp the second language. Students who speak a second language may know it well enough to communicate socially but do not grasp it well enough to understand abstract academic concepts. Pushing a second language too



quickly can hinder their education. A multicultural classroom continues to develop the first language while introducing the second (DeGaetano et al.1998). Neither language is seen as better than the other. Children are sensitive to the way their language is treated in school and in society; if they begin to sense that their first language is inferior to the second they may reject one of the languages. If they reject their first language, they will not have a proper foundation on which to build the second language (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Concepts can easily be transferred from one language to another, it is only a matter of vocabulary, but if children do not have a deep, abstract understanding of at least one language, they will not be able to grasp certain academic concepts in either language (DeGaetano et al. 1998). In many multicultural classrooms, all students, majority language speakers included, are taught to develop fluency in two languages. There is evidence that fluidity in two languages enhances academic and cultural maturity and makes students more accepting of other peoples. Bilingual students have been shown to have a better grasp of cognitive reasoning, concept formation, and cognitive flexibility; they also have a better understanding of languages as cultural concepts and grammar structure (Berk 1997). Truly bilingual programs will teach students in both languages either with one teacher speaking both languages half of the time, or students having two teachers who each teach using their own language of fluency (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

Parents are active partners in a multicultural classroom. Regardless of a parent's education or status level, he or she is seen as an expert on his/her child's culture and experiences and therefore is an important part of creating a culturally appreciative environment (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Teachers are aware that learning continues at home and therefore use parents as partners in teaching the children. Parents are never excluded

and are often invited into the classrooms. They are also consulted in any decision or problem regarding their child. In being able to reach a child, particularly in their early years, parents are the key to that child's learning techniques. Multicultural schools ensure that there are translators for parents at meetings and that those translators are not the children (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Teachers reach out to parents who work and may not be available at regular hours and make attempts to connect with and involve every parent (DeGaetano et al. 1998). Parents may be just as timid and confused about school policies and methods as the children; it is important to help them connect in some way. There are three levels of involvement for parents, the home, the school, and the district, the most common being the home. Parents can help in developing curriculum, finding cultural nuances that would be helpful in the classroom, or participating in or running classroom projects (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

The physical classroom environment of a multicultural classroom will be set up in a way that shows the children what is valued. The cultural make-up of the classroom and community should be reflected in classroom decorations, toys, and supplemental materials. Those materials will not have stereotypical images of the cultures. The physical environment can say a lot about a teacher's beliefs and therefore teachers should look to their students and parents for clues setting up the classrooms (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

Finally when students are evaluated and assessed, it needs to be done in a way that is parallel with the curriculum being used, and the methods being used to teach it. If written materials are not a part of the curriculum, then there should not be a written test. Assessment should also occur on an almost daily basis and be part of the continuing

curriculum so teachers can make continuous adjustments to meet the needs and goals of their students. Assessment should blend with the children's experiences so they can demonstrate what they know in a familiar way. Assessment should be a measure of what they know, rather than what they do not know. It is a tool for teachers to use to build future lessons; it is not a tool to determine failing students (DeGaetano et al. 1998).

### **Head Start**

To enable children from economically disadvantaged populations to start their school experience on a "level playing field" Head Start was implemented in the summer of 1965. Due to its nationwide success, it was reauthorized in 1994. The goal is to break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool age children with intensive programming to enhance their social competence. It was designed not only to get children prepared for the school environment, but also to address all the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs of the children it serves (Head Start 2001). Head Start is a government program directed by the Administration of Children, Youth and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). It was placed there and not under the Department of Education because the far-reaching goals of the program are not strictly educational. It is believed by many within Head Start that being in DHHS allows them great flexibility to work with many different social service agencies and experts. Since its beginning in 1965, Head Start has served over 13.1 million children and their families (Head Start 2001).

A child is eligible for Head Start if he or she is born into a family with income below the poverty line, if the family is receiving some form of public assistance, or if the child is within the foster care system. There are some exceptions for children with

disabilities but 90% of the children in a program must be low-income. In 1999, Head Start served approximately 800,000 children primarily between the ages of 3 and 5. Of that population, 70% were of minority ethnic and racial groups (Head Start 2001).

With its goal of overall social competence, Head Start has a collaborative approach to its goals and stresses local needs. In teaching children, Head start tries to involve the parents, the community, and other social service agencies to provide the family and the child with the most comprehensive approach possible to support and advance them.

Head Start feels that when children enter school at age five they are entering “an important life challenge and key test of (their) social competence (Head Start 2001).” Head Start is administered locally by local non-profit organizations or school districts that have received a grant from the Head Start Bureau. It is required that no more than 80% of the funding for a Head Start program can come from the federal grant. The remaining 20% must come from the community as a demonstration of the community’s support for the program. (Throughout this paper, the national program will be referred to as Head Start, while local sects will be referred to as Head Start programs.) The support can come either in financial or time values (Head Start 2001). Both of these regulations come from the belief that children must be treated individually and locally to best address their needs.

### **Research Question**

As the previous discussion indicates, multicultural education and supporting children’s culture are important in the learning process and should be implemented in educational settings, particularly those that serve minorities. Multicultural education is

not a new concept. A strong push for multicultural principles in the classroom began in the 1960s. Thus, multiculturalism has been a regular part of educational discourse for over thirty-five years. Multicultural education has been well researched and implemented, and while it is still evolving, there has been continuing support for its implementation for decades now.

As determined earlier, the United States government has not always been a proponent of multiculturalism in schools. There is a history of assimilation and oppression within the U.S. education system. Head Start is in a unique position to create a better future for those groups who were once oppressed. The large number of children it serves and the populations it serves makes it a critical player in the education of young minorities. Head Start has an opportunity to work with children from where they are. It can teach them how to function within the dominant system, while supporting their home culture. However, as a federal program the federal government and thus the dominant culture ultimately run Head Start. Under the control of the government, Head Start could be continuing the policies of assimilation in schools. Keeping this seeming contradiction in mind, this research investigates whether Head Start fully addresses the cultural needs of the people it works with or whether it tends to assimilate its clients into the mainstream culture.

## **Methodology**

To determine whether multicultural education is supported in the Head Start classroom, a qualitative examination was done. Data was collected from several sources using different techniques: from Head Start literature, observations of Head Start classrooms, and interviews with Head Start teachers. The classrooms and teachers used

in this study were from McLean, Livingston, and Will counties in Illinois. In McLean and Livingston counties, Head Start is organized through Heartland Head Start, and in Will County it is run through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Joliet.

The research began with examining Head Start literature from national, state, and local levels. Head Start policies, handbooks, training manuals, curriculum guides, and pamphlets were examined to determine what types of multicultural education they provide for their clients and to determine Head Start's philosophy regarding educating a diverse population. The Head Start literature was compared with current academic literature on the same subject to determine how well Head Start has kept up with current philosophies and practices. The Head Start literature was also examined to determine whether national and local literature are consistent in their stated mission and practices.

Head Start programs from McLean and Livingston, and Will counties in Illinois were observed. These counties were chosen because they represent different types of communities in Illinois and have varying amounts of diversity. McLean and Livingston counties, aside from the Bloomington-Normal area, are primarily rural. Clients in this Head Start program are 33% African American, 8% Hispanic, 57% European, and 2% Asian American. 97% of the clientele in this area speaks English. To get a different perspective of Head Start, Will County was selected as a diverse, urban program. In Will County, the clientele is 61.4% African American, 27% Hispanic, 11.4% European, and 0.2% American Indian; 27% of the clients speak Spanish. (Illinois Head Start 2001)

The Head Start headquarters of both counties were contacted and requested to participate in the study. The Education Coordinator of the Head Start programs chose three of four diverse classrooms to participate in the study and a date for observations

was decided upon. When arriving in the classroom for observations, the teachers were given a letter briefly explaining the study and asking for their signed consent to be observed and interviewed.

The observations took place in a non-participant observer format. Observations were done while not participating in the classroom and trying to remain inconspicuous, creating as minimal a distraction to the classroom as possible. An observation guide based on DeGaetano et al. (1998) and Derman-Sparks (1989) was used throughout the observations to help focus the input of data. (See appendix A for observation guide) The classroom set-up and materials were observed at a time when the children were not using the equipment, such as during meal times. In examining the physical nature of the classroom, the focus was on

*--Classroom arrangement*

*--Materials available for children to use*

*--Decorations used in the classroom*

When class was in session, the observations focused on the activities used in the classroom and the interactions between students and teachers. Broadly speaking, there were three areas of interest during class time observations.

*--The curriculum used in the classroom:* What activities are being used? What is being taught?

*--Student to student interactions:* How are the students interacting? Are there any types of group distinctions? Do they all treat each other the same?

*--Teacher to student interactions:* What teaching methods does the teacher use in teaching? Is more than one method used? How does the teacher treat the children? How is power distributed within the classroom?

Refer to appendix A for more detailed listings of the focus of observations.

The interviews were conducted with the teachers either face to face or by phone. The teachers chose the time for the interview and most often it was between class sessions. An interview guide, also based on DeGaetano et al. (1998) and Derman-Sparks (1989), was used throughout the interview but questions were added or deleted as deemed necessary. (See appendix B for interview guide). The interviews focused on four areas.

-- *Teacher's philosophies on multicultural education*

-- *Teacher's professional background:*

-- *Teacher's knowledge of the students' and parents' background*

--*Teacher's basis for classroom curriculum*

Teachers were also asked any questions that pertained specifically to their classroom.

Once observations and interviews are complete, the data was analyzed. The data was analyzed within two frameworks. One, how well do the classroom activities and teacher practices line up with the philosophies and policies of Head Start? Second, how do the classroom activities and teacher practices line up with current literature on the topic of multicultural education?

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of this study came from analyzing three sources of data: Head Start Literature, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. All three items were examined in relation to literature on the topic of multicultural education. The observations and teacher interviews were also examined in relation to Head Start literature to determine the compliance of the individual programs with national Head Start regulations.



## Head Start Literature

The examination of Head Start literature was intended to include an examination of not only national literature but Head Start literature from local and state levels. The local Head Start programs included in this research did not have much of their own literature. There were small pamphlets that discussed the local program and its demographic composition but referred to the national policy book for any requirements or policies. In that respect, the literature at the state level was similar. All Illinois literature was gathered from their website ([www.ilheadstart.org](http://www.ilheadstart.org)). It had the history of Head Start in Illinois and demographic information of Illinois programs, but all policy, mission, and goal statements referred to national literature. At the national level, there is an extensive amount of Head Start literature including the policy book, training guides, brochures, and bulletins. However, because all Head Start programs are required to follow the regulations and standards found in the *Head Start Performance Standards*, this section will focus primarily on that document.

The Performance Standards is a large document over 300 pages long. It contains the regulations for everything from awarding Head Start grants to stocking First Aid Kits. It contains the regulations that all Head Start classrooms and agencies are supposed to abide by. The first noticeable aspect of the document is that there is no specific section or subsection focused on multicultural education.

The Performance Standards begins with an introduction and the goals of Head Start. In the opening paragraph it states that Head Start is a “child-focused” and “family-centered” program. It then lists Head Start’s eight core values; two specifically mention cultural diversity and appreciation. The introduction continues with a discussion of the

importance of parents and communities in meeting the goals of Head Start. The introduction clearly includes many of the goals and values that are highlighted in multicultural literature. Involving families and communities are aspects considered crucial to developing a multicultural program and they are two principal items in the introduction to the *Head Start Performance Standards*.

The Performance Standards is broken down into five sections: general information, early childhood development and health services, family and community partnerships, program design and management, and implementation and enforcement. The sections concerning general information and implementation and enforcement will not be covered as they have little to do with the actual running Head Start. The other three sections are broken down further and will be discussed individually. Throughout the Performance Standards, there are references or stipulations concerning cultural sensitivity, parental involvement, and community involvement; all values that are important to multicultural education.

#### *Early Childhood Development and Health Services:*

This section is broken down into five subsections: child health and development services, education and early childhood development, child health and safety, child nutrition, and child mental health.

The subsection related to child health and development services contains information on determining a child's health status, screening for any developmental or behavior disorders, and creating an ongoing health care plan for each child. Each health plan is to be individualized to the child and created in collaboration with the parents. Parents are to be informed and consulted in every step of the process and can refuse any

health services. Also, regarding the screening for developmental or behavioral concerns, the standards stipulate that “to the greatest extent possible, these screenings must be sensitive to the child’s cultural background” (CFR 1304.20(b)(1)). Head Start does not have only one procedure it uses to screen children; programs can choose tools and interpretations that take into account the child’s and the family’s background.

The next subsection, education and early childhood development, focuses on creating the learning environment and curriculum. These standards very much comply with suggestions and requirements discussed in multicultural literature. The learning environment should be tailored to fit the needs and strengths of all children. A variety of materials, opportunities, and activities ought to be used to satisfy the various developmental levels, cultural backgrounds, interests, and learning styles of the students. Activities should be child-initiated and adult-directed, and allow children to work alone and with groups. Classrooms are expected to support the social and emotional development in part by “supporting and respecting the home language, culture, and family composition of each child” (CFR 1304.21(a)(3)(i)(E)). One suggestion given to accomplish this is through expanding the children’s first language while they are learning English. The learning environment and curriculum should be created through parental involvement and input and through teacher observations of the children.

Child Health and Safety is the next subsection and deals with physical illnesses and emergencies involving the students. There is little information relating to diversity or multiculturalism in this section. However, in compliance with having active parent involvement, parents must be involved in any concern of a child’s illness or emergency.

The next subsection concerns child nutrition. The objective of this subsection is to “promote child wellness by providing nutrition services that supplement and complement those of the home and community” (CFR 1304.23 introduction). All child nutrition information ought to be gathered via parents and the community should be used as resources when creating a nutrition program. Nutrition plans are to be sensitive to family and cultural preferences while at the same time exposing children to new foods in an effort to expand their experiences with food. Trying new foods coincides with the multicultural goal of helping children become more cross-cultural. The Performance Standards also state that food can be used in some activities, including activities that teach diversity. This practice teaches children a healthy appreciation and interest in food. Comparing foods from various cultures also provides an opportunity to see similarities and differences among cultures, an example is different breads used across cultures.

The final subsection concerns child mental health. This subsection also had little discussion involving multicultural goals. However, it does discuss informing and working with parents on mental health issues, and individualizing treatment and assessments of children.

#### *Family and Community Partnerships:*

In many ways the information regarding family partnerships echoes the information discussed in the previous section pertaining to parental involvement. However, there were some additions. The partnerships between families and Head Start begin with setting family goals. There also should be many opportunities for staff to interact with parents throughout the year. Those interactions must be “respectful of each family’s diversity and cultural and ethnic background” (CFR 1304.40(a)(5)). Activities

for parents and staff are also expected to either be bilingual or have interpreters to ensure that all families can participate. The minimum number of required contacts with parents are two home visits and two parent conferences per year. Parents should be given opportunities to increase their knowledge of child development, help in classroom planning, volunteer in classrooms, and plan classroom nutrition. Parents are also to be assisted in furthering their own education through connections with community services.

Community partnerships are crucial to reaching the goals of Head Start. Community members and agencies are to be used as resources for information and as providers of services like health care and adult education. Head Start should choose community partners that are culturally sensitive, and bilingual whenever possible. Communities are perceived as resources for culturally relevant information.

*Program Design and Management:*

This section is also broken down into subsections; they include program governance, management systems and procedures, human resources management, and facilities materials and equipment.

The policy committee, policy council, and the parent committee govern the program. Through these committees “parents and other community representatives are empowered to actively participate in the shared decision making process” (CFR 1304.30 introduction), values shared by multicultural literature. The policy councils and committees are composed of at least 51% parents of enrolled children and representatives from the community. The policy councils and committees have numerous responsibilities including funding, delegating decision-making responsibilities, staffing, ensuring program parents understand their rights and responsibilities, and assisting parent

committees. Policy councils and committees also serve as links to the community and parent committees. The parent committees are established at the center level and consist only of parents of enrolled children. They advise staff, plan and implement programs for parents and staff, participate in some governance, and help recruit and screen staff.

Management Systems and Procedures is the next subsection. It involves setting standards on how the agencies are managed in order to provide the services and meet the goals of Head Start. This subsection includes regulations for planning, communicating among key Head Start Players, record keeping, and program assessment. These standards are intended to be flexible so that each program and agency can develop management systems that best work for their unique situations. To be able to keep up with changes in the area, Head Start requires yearly community assessments.

Communication between parents and communities should be in the preferred language of the people as much as possible. Communication with parents and the community is also to occur regularly throughout the year.

Human resources management is the next subsection and contains the standards for staff selection and evaluation along with standards for training and development for staff and volunteers. Beyond being qualified to work with children, staff members are expected to be sensitive to cultural and community issues. They must be familiar with the ethnic backgrounds and languages of the children. Special efforts should be made to recruit bilingual and diverse staff members who reflect the community. CFR 1304.52(g)(2) specifically states that “when a majority of children speak the same language, at least one classroom staff member must speak their language.” Furthermore,

the standards on training and developments say that there should be ongoing opportunities for development to prepare the staff meet Head Start's goals.

The final subsection discusses regulations for facilities, materials, and equipment. These regulations are meant to help staffs "create a learning environment that is safe, accessible, welcoming, comfortable, age appropriate, culturally sensitive, and in keeping with individual needs of children and families" (CFR 1304.55 introduction). Classrooms should reflect the home environment, contain materials from home, and be nonstereotypical. Classroom materials should be easy for children at varying developmental levels to use so that all children can learn from them. These regulations are very much in sync with a child-centered philosophy. Multicultural literature also places emphasis on child-made and family-made materials, however this aspect is missing in the Head Start document.

Despite having no section on multicultural issues, the *Head Start Performance Standards* reflect the characteristics of multicultural education described in the literature. Throughout the document, emphasis is placed on family and community involvement, individualization of services, and cultural sensitivity. There is also emphasis placed on using the home language with children and parents. Head Start also stresses having staff members and volunteers who are familiar with the cultural background of the students. Staff and volunteers should also continually receive training. However within this document there is little guidance on how programs or teachers can implement these standards. For guidance, programs and teachers must turn to manuals, training guides, and other Head Start literature. There is no reference material specifically addressing multicultural education or diversity. Multicultural principles are intermingled into other

guides and training manuals. While blending multiculturalism into other areas is beneficial because diversity affects nearly all aspects of classroom life, a teacher or program that is struggling specifically with issues of diversity has no single resource from Head Start to turn to. A teacher or program would have to sift through other resources to find information to address the issue.

The only Head Start document specifically addressing multicultural education is a small booklet entitled *Multicultural Principles of Head Start Programs*. This booklet, which states the ten multicultural principles that Head Start is to abide by, was used as a resource in creating the Performance Standards. It states each of the ten principles with one or two paragraphs of explanation. All ten principles agree with the literature on multicultural education. However, it does not provide examples or guidance on how to implement the principles into the classroom.

The Head Start literature as a whole reflects the goals of multicultural education but provides little firm guidance on how to implement such principles in the classroom. The literature makes broad statement about ‘reflecting the community,’ ‘being culturally sensitive,’ or ‘supporting the home language,’ but goes no further to help teachers determine what that means and what it looks like in the classroom. That is the biggest oversight in the Head Start literature.

#### **Field Observations:**

This section discusses in detail what was observed in the classroom. The information was gathered from seven classrooms in five different locations. Three classrooms were in Bloomington, Illinois and four were in Joliet, Illinois. The observations were focused on four main categories, the classroom environment,



classroom materials, classroom activities, and teacher interactions. Additionally, although there are aspects of language included in all four categories, a separate category for language is included because of its importance in socialization and cognitive development.

*Classroom Composition:*

Before the four categories are discussed, it is useful to know the racial makeup of each of the classrooms. This provides background information on the ethnicities that should be reflected in the classrooms. These racial groupings and information are not exact. They are only based on appearances to the researcher and not on questions asked of the children or the teacher. Table one includes the racial breakdown by classroom.

**Table 1: Breakdown of class composition by race.**

	<b>Class 1</b>	<b>Class 2</b>	<b>Class 3</b>	<b>Class 4</b>	<b>Class 5</b>	<b>Class 6</b>	<b>Class 7</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>White</b>	3 23.1%	2 15.4%	1 7.7%	1 6.3%		6 54.5%	7 36.8%	20 20%
<b>Black</b>	3 23.1%	8 61.5%	5 38.5%	3 18.8%	6 40%	4 36.4%	9 47.4%	38 38%
<b>Hispanic</b>	6 46.2%	3 23.1%	7 53.8%	12 75%	9 60%	1 9.1%	3 15.8%	41 41%
<b>Asian</b>	1 7.7%							1 1%
<b>Total</b>	13 100.1%	13 100%	13 100%	16 100%	15 100%	11 100%	19 100%	100 100%

\*\* totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding

It should also be made clear that because a student was classified as Hispanic does not necessarily mean the child was Spanish speaking. Some students were and some were not. Again, no children were asked questions and no teachers were asked to discuss individual children.

The next piece of information concerns the racial backgrounds of the adults in the room: the teachers and the helpers. Table 2 shows the racial makeup of adults in each classroom and Table 3 displays the total number of adults by racial background. Again, these designations are inexact, as racial backgrounds were not asked of any of the adults. The information presented here is based on appearances only.

**Table 2: Racial makeup of teachers and helpers**

	<b>class 1</b>	<b>class 2</b>	<b>class 3</b>	<b>class 4</b>	<b>class 5</b>	<b>class 6</b>	<b>class 7</b>
<b>Teacher</b>	W	H	B	H	B	W	W
<b>Helper 1</b>	B	B	B	B	H	W	B
<b>Helper 2</b>	W	B	H		B	W	W

**W = white**

**B = Black**

**H = Hispanic**

**Table 3: Total Racial Breakdown of adults observed**

	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Helpers</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>White</b>	3 42.9%	4 30.8%	7 35%
<b>Black</b>	2 28.6%	7 53.8%	9 45%
<b>Hispanic</b>	2 28.6%	2 15.4%	4 20%
<b>Total</b>	7 100.1%	13 100%	20 100%

\*\* totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding

While there were more Hispanic students (41%) than any other group, with black students (38%) having the second largest population, this is not true in the composition of adults in the classroom. There were more black adults (45%) than any other group, with the second largest group being white (35%), and least number of adults being Hispanic

(20%). Furthermore, when looking at the racial makeup of teachers, there were more white teachers (42.9%) than either black or Hispanic (both at 28.6% with two teachers each). It is interesting that while whites were one of the least represented student groups in classroom composition, they were the most represented group in the position with the most authority. Both multicultural literature and the *Head Start Performance Standards* assert that efforts should be made to have the staff reflect the community. This practice benefits the students by having adults that are more likely to understand the culture of the student and interact with student in familiar manner. In only two classrooms, number four and number six, was the teacher the same race as the majority of students. However, in classroom six, 45% of the students were minorities yet there were no adults of color in the classroom. Classroom number one is also troubling. Nearly half of the classroom was Hispanic yet there were no Hispanic adults. Head Start does not appear to be following through on its goal of recruiting adults that reflect the backgrounds of their clients.

#### Classroom Environment:

The classroom environment is the first of the five classroom observation categories because it is the first aspect encountered upon entering a Head Start classroom. The classroom environment consists of the aesthetics of the classroom and of the hallways and entrances of the center. At one center, the children entered directly from outside thus there were no hallways to consider. Another classroom was located inside a church and therefore the staff could not decorate the hallways. Two of the centers were very welcoming to students and parents. In one, the hallways had both commercial and student artwork on the walls outside the classrooms. Entire class projects were posted

outside some of the classrooms. Another center had pictures of parent outings, student made posters with footprints and handprints, some class work, and a commercial poster of Martin Luther King Jr. The entrance to the last center was through the large motor area. It too had student artwork and commercial posters. The commercial posters displayed people of many backgrounds.

Inside the classrooms, all had at least one commercially made poster and most had more. As stipulated by Head Start policies and multicultural literature, most of those posters showed people from a variety of backgrounds. The number of posters and the types of posters varied from room to room. One interesting occurrence is that three of the classrooms had a Martin Luther King Jr. poster of some sort on their walls. MLK was the only historical person represented in the posters of any classroom. Some of the classrooms had posters of people around the world; two of those classrooms had posters depicting people in their native dress. Most of the classrooms also had some posters of animals and cartoons as opposed to people, but the posters of one classroom in particular were mainly of animals and not humans. In a subtle way, this practice seems to be avoiding the issue of diversity. Whether the classroom is avoiding diversity or not, the décor is not representing the diversity of the children in the classroom.

Although not covered in Head Start Performance Standards, Williams and DeGaetano (1985) and DeGaetano et al. (1998) both stress the importance of having student artwork in room decoration. Displaying student artwork expresses to children their importance in the classroom and their role in the learning process. All of the classrooms had some child artwork around the room. However, in four out of the seven classrooms the child artwork was in a corner, in small clusters high on the walls, or

partially hidden. In other words, in four of the classrooms the student art was out of the main line of vision of the children, defeating the purpose of having the student artwork.

In general, the classrooms were very warm and welcoming to children. The shelving units were close to the ground, and the classrooms were set up in clusters where students could move about freely and reach all items of interest. Most posters, rule charts, and daily materials were at child level. The activity areas had comfortable carpeting, pillows, or small chairs to accommodate the children. The classrooms were set up with the goal of pleasing and meeting the needs of the children, and generally reflected the backgrounds of the students.

#### *Classroom Materials:*

In comparison to the classroom environment, the classroom materials were less reflective of the diverse student populations. Classroom materials consist of the many different objects, like books, art materials, toys, and dolls that are used in the classroom. The book collections least reflect the description in the multicultural literature. Williams and DeGaetano (1985), Derman-Sparks (1989), and DeGaetano et al. (1998) all stress that books should represent the children and introduce the children to new cultures. Books should reflect various lifestyles and do so in non-stereotypical ways. Books should also represent the all of the languages found in the classroom. Although only titles and covers were examined and no examination of plot or content was done, the books in the classrooms failed to represent the students. In only one classroom was there a book that was written in Spanish, with two copies available. In another classroom there was one book that could be called bilingual because in the course of the story it included

some Spanish words and explained them in English. However, even as a bilingual book it was mainly written in English.

All of the classrooms had books with black children or black families on the covers. One classroom only had one such book. One classroom had a story of Ruby Bridges prominently displayed in the library area. There were also books about similarities and differences around the world, like different kinds of hats or bread used around the world. One classroom had two of those books, another classroom had one. One classroom had books on specific countries like Japan, China, and Mexico; another classroom had a book representing Spanish culture, but it showed Spanish culture in another country, not in the US. While these books follow the goal of introducing children to new cultures, these same classrooms did not have books on American subcultures. Only having books on the cultures of other countries can be seen as an example of the tourist approach to multicultural education. The rest of the books were either of white people, animals, dinosaurs, or various occupations. Again, in one classroom, a majority of the books had animals as main characters, seemingly avoiding the issue of diversity.

Overall, the books did not represent the ethnicities in any classroom well. The fact that every classroom had at least one Spanish speaker yet only one classroom had a Spanish book is troublesome. The Spanish children are not being taught to read in their own first language and are therefore not developing their first language, contradictory to both multicultural literature and Head Start standards. Furthermore, there were very few books representing any American cultures other than those of whites or blacks although clearly there was a large Hispanic population of students. Even among the classrooms

that did have books about blacks, only one had approximately an equal number of books about whites and blacks as opposed to having only a few token books about blacks.

In the art area, the materials used were not exceptional. Although DeGaetano et al. (1998) suggests using the art area to introduce new art techniques or materials representing various cultures, the classrooms had nothing that could be considered culturally specific. There were markers, crayons, paper, pencils, etc. Some of the classrooms had glue, scissors, and tape for the students to use in art construction. In the sense that the art materials were easily used and manipulated by the children, they were child centered; the children did not need any help using the materials. However the classrooms were lacking in the sense that there were not any culturally significant materials. In only one classroom was there a set of multicultural crayons, where the entire set was based on different skin tones. (Though in the interviews I learned that two other classrooms had used such crayons.) The multicultural literature also suggests that the art area should be decorated with examples of art from various cultures. This was not seen in any of the classrooms.

The dolls are another interesting account. First, all of the large dolls are girls; there were no boys. Second, all of the clothes they are wearing or outfits in the doll clothes drawers were everyday casual clothes, thereby missing an opportunity suggested by Williams and DeGaetano (1985) to introduce traditional cultural dress to children or to reflect the outfits some students may see at home or on special occasions. All of the classrooms had some combination of black, Hispanic, and white dolls. The white and Hispanic dolls had ethnically correct features. The black dolls are a different story. While they have darker skin, all of their hair and features are very 'white' looking. For

example, all of them had hair with smooth large curls. There were no dolls with either braids or with Afro style hair. Two of the classrooms also had small dollhouses with plastic male and female figurines. In one of the rooms the dolls were black, white, and Hispanic; in the other classroom the figures were only black and white. The features of the figurines were more ethnically correct than the dolls, except that the black women always had what would be permed hair. None had natural hair. Two classrooms also had homemade dolls that were Hispanic and black, an action that was suggested by Derman-Sparks (1989) to supplement commercially made dolls. Finally, one classroom had a language doll that if pressed in certain spots would talk in English and in Spanish.

The materials classified as dramatic play included puppets, dress up clothes, and housekeeping items. Each classroom had puppets. Many of the puppets were commercially bought animal puppets, but in four of the classrooms there were people puppets of all racial backgrounds. The same set of people puppets was used in each of the four classrooms. They had large plastic heads and cloth outfits of people in various occupations. The heads were ethnically accurate. There was also plastic play food in each of the classrooms, though few if any items could be culturally significant. No special tools, utensils, or unusual foods were observed. Also, all labeled food items were labeled in English only. The classrooms also had dress up clothes, which for the most part were every day clothes. There was some traditional female and male clothing and some classrooms had clothing representing various occupations. One classroom included a fancy sombrero along with other hats. Another classroom had what appeared to be homemade crochet dresses. Again opportunities were missed to expose children to a wide array of cultures through clothing and materials representing different cultures.



The manipulative materials observed were puzzles, blocks, and toys. Five of the classrooms had the same set of multicultural and disability puzzles. The puzzles depicted various ethnicities and at least one character per puzzle had a disability. In addition to those puzzle sets, most of the other puzzles depicted people from a variety of backgrounds. However, in the same classroom that seemed to be avoiding diversity in posters and books, nearly all of the puzzles were of animals, flowers, or fruit.

In five of the classrooms the block, toy, and/or sand areas had a set of figurines for 'boy toys.' Three sets were plastic and depicted only black and white figures in both blue and white-collar jobs. Two of the classrooms contained the same wooden figures called 'community workers.' These sets also only had black and white figures, and again showed the people in equal jobs. In two of the classrooms there was another set of smaller wooden figures that looked much older (judged by the clothing that appeared to be from the 70s or 80s) and showed women and people of color in lower status jobs. Finally, in one classroom there were plastic figures in the sandbox, all of which were white.

Overall, the classroom materials need to be updated from a multicultural perspective. It seems that the classrooms are trying to include diverse materials in some areas, but the materials do not match the makeup of the classroom. There are also many missed opportunities to teach children about new cultures through the normal course of play as opposed to specific lessons.

#### Classroom Activities:

The classroom activities examined here are the more formal activities done each day. While everyday activities like activity center time or large motor time are also

important to child development, most of the observations concerning those activities were covered above in classroom materials. This section begins with a discussion on music, something that was present in all of the classrooms. Every classroom began the day with the same good morning song. In three classrooms it was sung in Spanish and in English; in the other classrooms it was sung only in English. In four of the classrooms, music from a CD was used as an all class activity. In one classroom the music had a few songs with a Latin beat and one song with a Rock and Roll beat. In another classroom the songs had sounds and words similar to those of African American spirituals and had one song sung in Spanish. Another classroom used a CD that contained traditional American children songs like "One, Two, Buckle my Shoe" and "If You're Happy and You Know it Clap Your Hands," and one song that had a rock and roll beat. Finally, in one classroom the songs were pop sounding, some traditional children songs, and Latin sounding. Music is supposed to represent the music that the children know and it is supposed to expose the children to new sounds and new kinds of music. Because each classroom was observed only for one day, it is hard to generalize the type of music used in the classrooms. Classrooms that use a variety of sounds in one day provide a very rich experience for children, but of these four classrooms with CD music only one used a wide variety of music on that day. Throughout the day, the children sang in numerous clean up, settle yourself, or silly songs. Most of these were in English. Some followed rhyming and rhythm patterns familiar to African Americans and in two classes the chants were consistently done in Spanish and in English. Three classrooms had musical instruments out where the children could see and use them, and one classroom used

instruments in a daily activity. These instruments consisted of blocks, tambourines, rhythm sticks, maracas, and bongo drums.

There were a number of activities going on throughout the day. Since early childhood classrooms move quickly and there are too many activities to describe them all, only a few will be highlighted here.

There were several moments that would be classified as ‘teachable moments,’ a skill that shows a teacher’s ability to be flexible and respond to children’s interests. For example, in one classroom a child hiccuped. The teacher then asked the children “what’s a hiccup?” and led a short conversation with them about what a hiccup is. She did not require any concrete answers or give any firm answers. She simply let the children discuss. In another class the children were taken outside for their large motor time, the day was a bit cold and windy so when the students came in the teacher used a large mirror to point out to them how their cheeks turned red when they were cold. In one classroom there was an opportunity to address issues of discrimination. Derman-Sparks (1989) advocates seizing such opportunities in classrooms to help children recognize and deal with such situations. In this particular classroom, the teacher read a story to the class about a fish that was discriminated against because he lacked a special fin that all the other fish had. As she read the book, the teacher asked questions about how the fish might feel and if it was all right to treat someone like that. There were also activities that tried to teach the children about themselves, by recognizing their address, learning to spell their names, or recognizing their names in writing. One classroom had an activity that was difficult for the children. It involved reading a book about sharing a strawberry and demonstrating with a real strawberry where to cut for half a strawberry. The teacher

had a carton of strawberries and the children seemed anxious to eat a strawberry. They were more concerned with the strawberries than the story. However, once the teacher demonstrated what half a strawberry was, she put all the fruit away. The students were disappointed. This activity did not consider the needs or reactions of the children when food is present.

For the most part the activities involved the students, though the students did not always have much control over the activities. In one class they were supposed to look through magazines for pictures in a certain color, yet the teacher and aides held the magazines and turned the pages. In other situations the children could not call out but had to be called on, or students listened to books read and picked out by the teacher. Once an activity was started the children were able to get very involved but they generally had little initial choice. Head Start Performance Standards and the multicultural literature state that there should be child and adult initiated activities. Other than the activity centers, the all class activities were adult directed.

### Interactions

Interactions with the children are possibly the most important aspect in assessing whether a classroom is child-centered or teacher-centered. Social interactions between teachers and students are key to a child's social and cognitive development. An indicator of whether a classroom was child-centered or teacher-centered was whether or not the teacher sat on a chair or on the floor when interacting with the children. In three of the classrooms, the teacher would sit on a chair to conduct activities, putting herself at a different, higher level than the children. In the other four classrooms the teacher would sit on the floor with the children and seemed to really participate with them rather than

remaining aloof. An action as small as sitting on a chair or on the floor set the tone for how the teacher interacted with the children. In addition, the teacher's style of interactions also seemed to be the style used by the teacher helpers.

Four of the teachers could be classified as having a very easygoing and child-centered style of interacting with the children. These teachers were very consistent about looking the children in the eye, saying 'good job,' having conversational discussions, asking open ended questions, and responding to the student's requests immediately. These are teachers who would sit on the floor with the children. This style demonstrated that the children are important and are equals in the classroom regardless of age, gender, or race. These teachers were very focused on the children and their needs. Once an activity was initiated, these teachers would become as much of a participant as a leader of the activity. For example, when singing songs, their voices would blend in with those of the children. When one of these teachers had to correct the children they would sit them down and talk with them or correct them firmly while still showing care and concern. One in particular was motherly and firm when correcting the children; she would hug the child while correcting him or her in a firm voice. Another teacher had trouble with a little boy, but to correct him she would hug him, let him sit by her, or even allow him play outside of the group if needed. He was new to the class and to explain his behavior to the other children she told them he was new and they all needed to help him learn the rules just like they had to learn the rules when they first arrived in school.

The other three teachers had more dominant, teacher-centered styles, but in varying degrees. There was one teacher who was more dominant in the classroom but in a quiet, disconnected way. She tended to seem like she was not paying that much

attention to the children. During activity center time she would set up for other activities or complete paperwork and not really look at the children. While the above four teachers would also set up and do paperwork, they were also immediately responsive to any student who even appeared to need attention. In contrast, this teacher went about her business and let her helper deal with any student concerns. When she did interact with the children she was very casual and gentle with them. When correcting them, she would have them solve their own problems or arguments. For example, two students were arguing over a chair and this teacher told them that there were plenty of other chairs at the table, to solve the problem. She would joke with the children during some activities and allowed for their squirms and call outs without too much correction. She was also very congratulatory with the children and positive when interacting with them. When conducting an activity, she was an authority figure, not a participant. For example, when singing songs, she would start the song but once the children started singing she would stop and only follow along with hand motions. When that song was over, she would start another and then fade out again. She was a teacher who sat in a chair.

One of the other 'chair-sitting' teachers was an authority in the classroom in a style that was much stronger than the previous teacher. When singing songs, her voice would overpower the children. Once, a helper was leading songs while the teacher was doing some paper work across the room. Without even looking at the children, she sang along and overpowered them. When this class was sitting together eating meals, the conversations between the teacher and the students were academic and not casual. The teacher would ask questions and the children would answer with objective, few word answers. The teacher also asked objective questions when leading an activity or reading

a book. Generally she only allowed one student to answer before moving on. There were even moments when she seemed to be talking over the children. When asking the students questions or conversing with them she would talk in between each child's comments. Finally, when interacting with some Spanish-speaking children (she did not speak Spanish), she would emphasize the sounds and carefully articulate them in a way that was different from her interactions with the English-speaking children. While this teacher was obviously interested in her pupils and treated them respectfully, she did not treat them as equal participants in their learning. She was the center of attention and dominated the classroom.

The final teacher was also a 'chair-sitter' and had a very confrontational manner of interacting with the children. The children did not seem like a priority to this teacher. Twice during the day, another adult came into the classroom and the teacher had an extended conversation with that person while ignoring what the children were doing. This teacher was also very confrontational about correcting the children. She would get in the face of the children and nearly yell at them. For example, when the class was lining up to return to the classroom after large motor time, the teacher tied the shoe of a child. Another child, whose shoes were already tied, asked the teacher to tie hers. The teacher bent down very close to her face and in a loud voice said, "you need to get in line now." During any activity, reading a book, taking a walk, or singing songs this teacher would constantly interrupt herself to correct the children for not sitting correctly, talking, or being fidgety. To discipline them she would always frame her remarks as "we don't do ..." or "we need self control" or some other statement that could be construed as teaching the children to act responsibly. However, when the comments presented to the

children so disrespectfully, by almost yelling, all learning possibilities were lost. Once, when they were singing and dancing with the CD player, the class got up to dance a mambo line and as she walked past me, the teacher rolled her eyes. Even when the children were picking the songs they wanted to sing, this teacher decided the final song herself. None of the children sang along. At the end of the day this teacher lectured the children about their misbehavior and threatened to take away a field trip, which made one little girl cry. This teacher tended to always be struggling with the children and they talked back to her, something that was not seen in any of the other classrooms.

All day long, this teacher struggled with one little boy. In her eyes, he would not sit correctly and participate. The day started with him calling out and her refusing to acknowledge him because he had not raised his hand. The child then raised his hand and she still refused to call on him. She told him to put his hand down because she was not going to call on him. He kept his hand up and yelled out 'no.' The teacher asked the helper to hold his arms down for him. Eventually he settled down, but later in the day he was not sitting on the correct spot on the carpet and refused to sit where she told him to. The teacher asked one of the helpers to carry him out of the circle and then the two helpers held him to the ground by his hands and feet. The teacher told the helpers to go where she could not see him. She told the other students that it was ugly behavior and she did not want to see it and they should not look either. For the rest of the day the boy was allowed to participate completely. At the slightest noncompliance he was separated from the other students. A situation like this goes against all classroom literature. It is very disrespectful and humiliating to the child. It also makes him into an outcast in the eyes of the rest of the students.



Language:

The final category of the observations is language. As the *Head Start Performance Standards* and other literature point out, students' home language should be developed while they acquire English. That was not the case in these classrooms. Every classroom had at least one Spanish-speaking child while only two of the teachers spoke Spanish fluently and one teacher spoke small phrases. The Spanish-speaking children would speak Spanish to each other but English to the English teachers and students. Four of the classrooms had some toys or areas labeled in Spanish. Only one classroom had everything labeled in both languages, in others it was only select items. Generally, the Spanish labels were in smaller print than on the English labels. Two of the teachers discussed having communication problems with their students and the families. Some examples included not being able to understand a parent's letter and not being able to help a girl who was being picked on in Spanish. In one classroom the teacher tried counting the days of the month in Spanish but had to stop at ten because she did not know any further.

In the two classrooms where the teachers did speak Spanish, they encouraged the Spanish speakers to speak English. The teachers would get the students' attention or speak casually with them in Spanish; however, when it came to actually teaching the teachers used English and did not translate. However they did do daily activities like the calendar or songs in both languages. Sometimes they would congratulate the children in Spanish or talk in Spanish when the children did not understand. When the students approached these teachers in Spanish, both would tell the students to speak English. Ironically, the teachers would congratulate the English speakers when they spoke or sang

in Spanish. These actions give the impression that Spanish is acceptable as a novelty language for English speakers to learn, but as a primary language it is unsuitable.

Spanish and English speakers are learning a low appreciation for Spanish. The two Spanish-speaking teachers were native speakers, so this impression was probably not given on purpose. Nonetheless, by requesting English from Spanish children and congratulating English speakers when they used a Spanish word, these teachers gave the impression that the two languages are valued differently.

### **Interviews:**

Due to time constraints with many of the interviews, not all the questions listed in the interview guide (see Appendix B) were asked of all the teachers. In many of the classrooms the teachers simply could not leave the children for a long enough time, or the interviews were conducted in the short time between morning and afternoon classes.

There were, however, a few questions that were asked of all of the teachers. They are:

- 1) What are your beliefs on multicultural education?
- 2) What is your educational background?
  - Do you participate in professional developments? How often?
  - Have you ever had any specific training regarding multicultural education?
- 3) How well do you feel you know your students and their families?
- 4) How do you plan your curriculum and daily activities?
- 5) What aspect of your classroom are you most happy with and what would you most like to improve?

These five questions were selected as providing the most supplemental information to the observations.

There were several common themes to the responses to the first question regarding beliefs on multicultural education. Nearly all of the responses involved teaching the children about cultures different from their own because they will meet people from many different backgrounds throughout their lives. In addition, one teacher responded that the children need to “learn about their culture and keep up with their culture. But they also have to adapt to the styles of the school system that they are going in to.” Two teachers mentioned something connecting the classroom activities to the children’s cultures. All of the responses in one way or another indicated that multicultural education was for children of all cultures. These responses do comply with multicultural literature which states that children are encouraged to become cross cultural through learning about their own and other cultures. The responses indicate that teachers are genuinely interested in created a classroom that encourages multiculturalism.

The next question is in regards to the teachers’ educational and professional background. All but one of the teachers had either an Associate’s degree or a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. That teacher was in the process of getting her AA. In fact, four of the teachers were currently in school working on obtaining the next highest degree. One teacher was even working on acquiring a Master’s degree in special education and early childhood education.

Even more interesting were the responses concerning professional developments. In compliance with *Head Start Performance Standards* and multicultural literature, all teachers indicated that they had professional developments throughout the year, including a weeklong training before school started. Additionally, in Joliet, the teachers indicated that they have developments at least once a month with many other opportunities such as

workshops and conferences offered throughout the year. The Bloomington teachers indicated that they have development days three or four times throughout the year and that they too are offered additional opportunities. However, when asked if any of their training had been specific to multicultural education, the answers were varied. One teacher there had been a speaker during the beginning of the year training week (she was the only teacher from her program that mentioned it, so it was not memorable for the other teachers in her program). A few teachers had gone to workshops on multicultural education at summer conferences. One teacher said yes, she had had multicultural training, but she could not remember any specific instance. A few teachers simply said no, they had not had any multicultural training. It seems that the teachers have not really had access to multicultural training from their programs. Teachers who had gone to outside conferences or workshops were the most able to discuss any multicultural training. While conferences and workshops are beneficial for the spread of ideas, multicultural issues should also be addressed locally by the programs to address local issues of importance to the community. This is not happening in the programs observed.

When asked about how well the teachers felt they know their students and families, all of the teachers indicated that they knew the children pretty well. They had worked with them for more than half a school year (except for one teacher who had started only in December) and felt they had had enough time to get to know the students well. Regarding knowledge of the families, the answers were more varied. Most of the teachers mentioned the required home visits and parent teacher conferences as instances where they had gotten to know the parents. Four teachers also discussed that they had better relationships with parents who dropped off and picked up their children. One

teacher said that she was trying to get to know the parents because as a Head Start employee it is her job to know the families. Two teachers said that they feel they know the families pretty well but that the family service workers know the families really well, so these teachers rely on the Family Service workers for important information. One of these teachers was very concerned that she did not speak Spanish and could not communicate well with all the parents. She felt she was missing a large part of her relationship with parents that she had had in the past. In that sense she felt forced to rely on the Family Service worker. Although all the teachers discussed getting to know the parents better, only one teacher discussed why parents are important, she said “I think the most important thing is trying to acknowledge them as parents, and you know, the way they teach their child. You don’t put that down ever.” This teacher felt her most important role with parents was to make them feel comfortable with the program and with her as the teacher. Thus in building relationships with parents, there is a sense that the teachers are doing it because it is required but they do not do more than the requirements and do not see the need. Their responses indicate little interest in parents as partners as discussed extensively throughout multicultural literature and *Head Start Performance Standards*.

Concerning how they plan their curriculum and activities, all of the teachers said that the basic curriculum was mandated by Head Start but they plan the individual activities. The teachers base their activities either on Head Start manuals or other teacher resources they have accumulated. Only three of the teachers specifically mentioned incorporating the children’s interests and needs into the classroom. None of the teachers mentioned involving parents in the planning. What types of multicultural activities are

incorporated into the classroom was discussed with three of the teachers. Two referred to activities that they have every month where they study one country by doing activities and eating foods related to that country. For example, in March they study Ireland for St. Patrick's day; in May, they study Mexico for Cinco de Mayo. These activities sound very much like what Derman-Sparks (1989) refers to as the tourist approach. She specifically warns against the temptation to cover countries according to their holidays because it does not adequately represent the culture and does not show how those cultures are in America. It also teaches multiculturalism as a separate activity rather than integrating it into all classroom activities.

Finally when asked what they like most about their classrooms and what they would like to improve there were some common themes. The teachers were happy with many things: the routine, the growth they see in the children, and the freedom that the children have. On the other hand, nearly all of the teachers felt in constrained by time in some way. Either they did not have enough time to do paperwork or they felt rushed through lessons. Several of the teachers were not satisfied with the tone of their classrooms and wanted to change them. One teacher was very disappointed with language barriers between her and her students and between the entire program and the Spanish speaking population they serve. She felt her program was really lacking in keeping up with the increase of Spanish speaking clientele.

In addition to those five questions, four teachers were asked how they feel diversity affects their classrooms. Three of the teachers pointed to language differences. The teachers discussed how quickly their Spanish-speaking children pick up English and that they are surprised and happy when the English-speaking children learn Spanish,

again showing the contradiction in how Spanish speaking abilities are treated depending on if the child is a native English or Spanish speaker. Two teachers said that while their classrooms are diverse, the children do not notice the color differences, the only differences they notice are language differences.

During one interview, the teacher seemed very distressed about the language barriers and changes in her classroom. She said she and the program were struggling to keep up with the Spanish speaking population and felt that she was not getting help from the program headquarters. She could not communicate with parents, had no way to translate all the notes for the parents, and did not feel completely qualified to teach in the classroom that she was teaching. She even said that at the beginning of the year she looked for resources and people who were struggling with the same problems as her but could not find any. Obviously this program violated Head Start's standards requiring programs to recruit staff and volunteers that represent the community. The teacher said that 25% of the program's clients speak Spanish yet only one employee in the entire program was fluent in Spanish. This teacher also was not comfortable with her program's original plan to segregate all the Spanish-speaking children into one classroom, especially when the program does not employ any Spanish-speaking teachers. The language segregation did not happen because of how the children registered but she was still leery of their philosophy and hoped they would not try it next year. She seemed very concerned with being able to work with the children and parents and felt trapped by language barriers, worse yet felt she was not getting help from her office.

While this teacher was the most extreme example, she was representative of the impression gathered from all of the teachers. They seemed genuinely interested in

providing the best possible classroom for their students and meeting the students' individual and multicultural needs, yet they were not given the training or information on how to do that. Each teacher felt they were doing pretty well and doing their best but felt there could be improvement.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, Head Start had some weaknesses and some strengths regarding multicultural education. This research set out to investigate the question, 'does Head Start fully address the cultural needs of the people it works with or does it tend to assimilate its clients into the mainstream culture?' The answer, although difficult to generalize, is yes and no. Head Start does not *fully* address the cultural needs of the people it works with; on the other hand, Head Start is not trying to assimilate its clients into the mainstream culture. Head Start is somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum.

Nieto (1994) discussed four levels of multicultural education: (1) tolerance, (2) acceptance, (3) respect, and (4) affirmation, solidarity, and critique. Below this spectrum is monocultural education which operates with a blindness to diversity. Tolerance is an assimilationist philosophy where differences are "endured, but not necessarily embraced" (Nieto 1994:11). Acceptance is the level where diversity is acknowledged but is hardly integrated into the classroom. The respect level holds diversity in high regards and uses diversity to drive many of its classroom goals. Finally, affirmation, solidarity, and critique uses differences and conflict as tools for learning, and all education is multicultural education.



While each Head Start classroom was slightly different and some were more multicultural than others, the Head Start classroom environments and teaching practices would be classified as tolerant. There were some aspects of a few of the classrooms that might be pushed into the acceptance or even the respect level; however, there were aspects of other classrooms that could be pushed below the spectrum into monocultural education. Conversely, when looking at the Head Start literature, Head Start is theoretically very multicultural. The multicultural goals and standards stated in the *Head Start Performance Standards* would fall into Nieto's final level of affirmation, solidarity, and respect.

Head Start and the teachers all seem to recognize the importance of multicultural education, but have yet to fully implement it. Moreover, the teachers seem to want to be able to help their students but do not know how to fully implement multicultural philosophies into their classroom. This could be due to Head Start's lack of resources on the topic and the lack of multicultural training given to the teachers. The *Head Start Performance Standards* and the *Multicultural Principles of Head Start Programs* both coincide nearly perfectly with the multicultural principles found throughout the literature on multicultural education. They both stress the importance of involving parents and communities, reflecting the backgrounds of the children in the classroom, exposing children to new cultures, developing a child's home language while teaching English, and recruiting and training staff to deal with diversity. However beyond stating goals, philosophies, and standards, as an organization Head Start is giving little guidance to teachers and programs on how to implement multiculturalism into classrooms. Head

Start could resolve this by developing resources on multiculturalism for teachers and by mandating teacher developments specific to multiculturalism.

This lack of direction concerning multiculturalism trickles down to the classroom level where teachers are genuinely trying to create the best environment for their students but are falling short in several areas. The environment and materials in a classroom should reflect the cultures of the students of the classroom and introduce them to new cultures. They do this by having commercially and homemade materials and posters that reflect a variety of backgrounds, including those of the students. All of the classrooms to some degree had a variety of cultures present in the environment and in the materials. However, there was a discontinuity between the cultures in the classrooms and the cultures represented in materials. Most of the materials that displayed non-white people displayed black people and few Hispanics. In some areas such as clothing or plastic food, opportunities were missed to introduce new cultures. It seems that teachers did not fully understand the purpose of having diverse materials and therefore the environment and materials were not as culturally rich as they could have been. Take for example the teachers that hid child artwork, or the teacher that used animals and cartoons in place of people for much of her materials. These teachers might be lacking information on why they should be doing such things.

Activities and interactions also demonstrated that Head Start is at the first level of multiculturalism. Most of the activities were adult initiated and directed as opposed to the child-centered philosophy important for children to develop positive self-images and positive images of others. Furthermore, multiculturalism was not integrated into the curriculum. Instead it was taught separately on holidays or special occasions. The fact

that teachers wanted to teach diversity shows that they are interested in having classrooms teach children to appreciate different cultures, but do not know how to do so properly. Also, in the sense that three of the seven teachers were 'chair-sitters' and dominated the classrooms, indicates that more should be done to help teachers develop child-centered classrooms.

Language was another area found to be lacking in terms of complying with multicultural goals. Language is an important part of cognitive and social development, treatment of language is one of the most important aspects of a multicultural classroom. In these classrooms, teachers tried to teach English as quickly as possible. In fact, they were proud of how fast their Spanish speaking children were learning English. They did not teach the children in their home language and did not promote the development of Spanish in Spanish speaking children. At the same time, teachers would congratulate English speakers who were learning Spanish. This exhibits a negative view of Spanish as a novelty language that is not to be used in formal speech. Furthermore, one of the two programs observed employed only one person who was fluent in Spanish.

Overall, this study found that while teachers wanted to have a multicultural classroom, they did not know how, or they did not understand the purposes of the multicultural principles they are expected to follow. The teachers did not understand or know how to create a multicultural environment, they did not know how to treat language differences, and they did not understand the importance of parents in being able to create a multicultural classroom. All of these teachers, except one who was nervous about her abilities as a bilingual teacher, believed they were doing a good job of educating their

students. While they may be doing a great job of educating the children and having academic success, the teachers have not created a multicultural environment.

According to Cooley, Mead, and Vygotsky, (Berk 1997; Schaefer 1998) children develop culturally and cognitively through the same vehicle, social interactions. The key to social interactions is language. Therefore, for children to be able to reach their highest potential they need to be taught through their own culture and language and they need to be taught to be cross-cultural. Research indicates that without a culturally appropriate learning environment children can fall behind in school or worse yet develop emotional problems.

Head Start set out to help fix the problem of minority failure in school. Yet, over thirty-five years later Head Start is failing to provide children with a multicultural classroom. Instead it is providing a tolerant classroom. There is no doubt that throughout the nation there are some exceptional Head Start classrooms. In fact, one of the references used in this research was tested in a Head Start classroom. There is also no doubt that the classrooms observed in this research are not the worst examples of a lack of multiculturalism in Head Start. This assessment that Head Starts needs to improve the multicultural aspect of its program is not alone. In an evaluation of the Head Start requisitioned by the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families in 1994, it was determined that Head Start needed to work more on meeting the multicultural needs of its clients.

Head Start has teachers eager to create the best possible environment for their children, but are lacking in guidance and in training. These teachers want to create an environment where their students can learn about other cultures with the hope that the

children will then be better able to interact with diverse populations as they grow older. In that sense, Head Start is not necessarily assimilating its clients. The teachers are too desirous of teaching diversity to let that happen. However, no matter how desirous they are, the teachers do not have the training or knowledge to be able to fully implement the multicultural goals of Head Start, and thus are not fully meeting the needs of their diverse clientele.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited both in scope and in depth. Only seven classrooms were studied and those came from only two programs in Illinois. The results from seven classrooms containing one hundred students can hardly be generalized to all of Head Start, a program that serves over 800,000 students a year.

The Head Start literature was also limited. The *Head Start Performance Standards* and the *Multicultural Principles of Head Start Programs* were examined thoroughly for references to multicultural practices and philosophies. Other national Head Start literature was only glanced at. There is plenty more Head Start literature to be sorted through in order to get a more complete picture of Head Start's philosophies and use of multicultural education.

Observations of seven classrooms should also not be generalized. The classrooms were only observed for one day each, and for whole-day classrooms, only half of the class was observed. Any one who works with children, particularly young children, can attest that children can vary from day to day and have ups and downs. Teachers have to adapt to those swings in children. So while the observations presented a small slice of classroom life, it can hardly be said that what was seen goes on in the classrooms every

day. To be able to make general assumptions about a particular classroom, one would have to observe the classroom for an extended period of time.

Furthermore, classroom observations of materials were also limited and not extremely thorough. Classrooms and classroom materials were looked at from the surface. Books were not examined for content. Not all chests, cabinets, and boxes were opened, and every piece of dress up clothing or doll clothing was not gone through. The examination of materials took place when children were in the room making a more thorough examination difficult without disrupting the classroom. A complete observation would have to be conducted at a time when children were not present and would have to take enough time to thoroughly examine the content of all items. Classroom material observations would also have to be done over time because most teachers do not put all materials out at once, but rotate materials periodically. Another limit to classroom observations is that the true background of the children was not known, and therefore the extent to which the children's culture was reflected in the classroom could not be fully appreciated.

Finally, there were limits in conducting the interviews. Time constraints of the teachers and the researcher led to shortened interviews with fewer questions and less time to delve into responses. The teachers were either using their planning or classroom time to complete the interviews and therefore might have been rushed and might not have given the fullest answers they otherwise would have.

Every aspect of the information gathered in this study was limited in some way and therefore should not be generalized to represent all Head Start classrooms or even be assumed to fully represent these seven classrooms. However, despite its many

limitations, this information is still useful. The information does provide a glimpse into the life of Head Start. While the information can not be generalized, it can also not be thrown out. The examination of the Performance Standards is useful because it contains standards that all Head Starts are to abide by. The classroom observations provide first impressions of the Head Start classrooms. The brief teacher interviews indicate the teachers' first impressions of the questions without too much time to rethink or second-guess their answers. In this sense, the information presented here provides a window into Head Start. While it cannot be generalized, it gives a first impression and a starting point for future investigations.

## Appendix A

### Observation Guidelines

Adapted from

Derman-Sparks, Louise and the ABC Task Force (1989) *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

And

DeGaetano, Yvonne, Williams, Leslie R. and Volk, Dinah (1998) *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Approach for the Primary Classroom*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

- I. The classroom environment.
  - Are there pictures reflecting the backgrounds of all classroom members (staff and students)?
  - Are there pictures displaying major racial/ethnic groups from the community and the nation?
  - Do the images accurately reflect daily working, family, and recreational life in America?
  - Is there a balance of images of ethnic/racial groups, or is it only token displays of those groups, only one or two?
  - Are the images stereotypical?
  - Does the artwork available in the classroom reflect the diversity of the classroom?
- II. Classroom materials.
  - Books
    - Do they reflect a diversity of gender, racial and cultural, and occupational backgrounds?
    - Do they present accurate images and information, (non-stereotypical, ex, Indians)
    - Do the books show contemporary daily life in America in non-stereotypical ways?
    - Do they depict a variety of lifestyles, incomes, and racial/ethnic groups?
    - Are there specific books on culture teaching children about different lifestyles?
    - Are there books in different languages, bilingual? (sign language and Braille included)
  - Dramatic Play
    - Do the materials reflect home-life of the cultural groups represented in the classroom?
    - Do the materials reflect cultures of the greater community and nation?
    - Are there materials for self-exploration, for example mirrors, different types of play clothing of several occupations and genders?
  - Language
    - Are there opportunities for children to see and hear various languages for example in blocks, puzzles, books, posters, games, tapes, and songs?
  - Music



- Does music authentically reflect the various cultures represented in the classroom, examples of music to sing, listen to, nap to, dancing, etc.
- Art Materials
  - Do paints, crayons, markers, play-doh, collage materials, etc. represent a variety of skin tones?
  - Are there mirrors for children to examine their own appearances?
- Dolls
  - Do dolls represent a mix of ethnic/racial groups represented in the United States, are the dolls authentic looking and not simply white dolls with other skin colors?
  - Are there male and female dolls in a variety of clothing?

#### ➤ **Manipulative**

- Do all other toys represent non-stereotypical images of diverse ethnic/racial groups in a fair balance of materials.
- Do the materials use images of life in other countries as a substitute for life in the U.S. e.g. Life in Japan for life of Japanese-Americans?
- Are images contemporary? E.g. Native Americans shown today rather than during the past?

### III. Interactions

- Do teachers pick up on non-verbal and verbal expressions of interest as quickly with children of color?
- Do teachers seem to either overhelp or overprotect children who are different?
- Are similar behaviors interpreted and responded to differently with white compared to children of color?
- When children touch or comment about another's hair or skin (showing obvious curiosity about people different from themselves) are their curiosities explored or ignored or redirected?
- Are children's cultural learning styles respected? Are provisions made
  - For children who prefer play and work with other children or who prefer to work alone?
  - For children who prefer a personal relationship to the teacher or children who prefer teacher intervention only when the child requests help?
  - For children who prefer learning with action, people-oriented activities, or prefer working by themselves with objects?
- Are all children supported in their preferred learning styles and encouraged to try new ways of interaction with people and materials?

### IV. Activities

- Do cultural activities connect to individual children and their families?
- Is it acknowledged that although cultural patterns are real, they do not extend to all members of a group and therefore no generalizations should be made?
- Do the cultural activities connect to concrete daily life?
- Do the activities reflect the idea that everyone has culture?
- Does cultural diversity penetrate the classroom through daily activities?

- Are culturally separations terms like 'us' 'we' 'they' avoided when talking about culture?
- Are similarities and differences explored when discussing other cultures?
- Are children taught how to live in the dominant culture and in their mother culture?
- Are children taught about their own as well as other groups?

## **Interview Guide**

Adapted from

Derman-Sparks, Louise and the ABC Task Force (1989) *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

And

DeGaetano, Yvonne, Williams, Leslie R. and Volk, Dinah (1998) *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Approach for the Primary Classroom*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

### 1) What are your beliefs on multicultural education?

--What is it?

--Is it necessary and why?

--Who is it for?

--How often does it occur?

### 2) Do you speak another language?

### 3) What is your educational background?

--Do you participate in professional development? How often?

--Have you ever had any specific training regarding multicultural education?

--Where do you go for development? Who sponsors it?

### 4) In what ways do you feel diversity affects your classroom?

### 5) What goals do you have for your classroom?

--For individual students?

--How do you determine these goals?

--Are they short term or long term?

### 6) How well do you feel you know your students?

--Their families?

--Their communities?

--What information do you look to gather about your students?

- What steps have you taken/do you take to get to know your students?
- 7) Do you make observations of your students?
  - How often?
  - What do you use this information for?
- 8) What types of multicultural activities or materials do you use in your classroom?
  - When do you use them?
  - How do you choose them?
  - In what ways are children's cultural backgrounds and interests incorporated into activities?
- 9) What teaching strategies do you use in your classroom?
- 10) Are parents involved in your classroom?
  - In what ways?
  - How do they come to be volunteers? (Their initiative or yours)
  - How are parents kept informed about the class?
  - How often are individual parents contacted?
- 11) What types of assessment do you engage in?
  - How often do you evaluate your students?
  - What criteria do you use when assessing?
  - How do you assess your own teaching/curriculum?
- 12) In what ways do you feel you encourage diversity?
- 13) What aspect of your classroom are you the most happy with?
- 14) What would you most want to improve in your classroom?
- 15) Give an example of a time you grabbed a 'teachable moment'?
- 16) Any other questions that might arise after the observations.

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